

Statement of the Alliance of Future Harvest Centres of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR)

First Meeting of the Governing Body of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.

Ministerial segment, Madrid, June 12-16, 2006.

Distinguished Ministers, Director General of FAO, Ambassadors and Delegates. On behalf of the Alliance of Future Harvest Centres of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, I thank you for providing me this opportunity to address the Ministerial segment of the Governing Body of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.

First of all, I want to say that we are extremely pleased to finally be here at the First Meeting of the Governing Body. There were times during the past 10 years of negotiations when this meeting seemed very far off indeed. During the most difficult moments, it seemed possible the day might never arrive. All members of the global community -- those that have already and those that have not yet ratified or acceded to the Treaty -- should be congratulated for having made it to this point.

The Treaty is critically important for the Future Harvest Centres because it provides a basis for building trust and goodwill among those actors who must work in harmony for the world to be able to make full use of PGRFA to increase food security and reduce poverty, to boost the nutritional value of the diets of the poor and to reduce the vulnerability of poor people in rural areas to external shocks.

The actors I referred to obviously include the state parties and national-level ministries that are represented in this room. But they also include national agricultural research services, universities, international research institutes, farmers and national farmers' organizations, private sector companies and civil society organizations.

Many of you have come across cases where research, breeding and conservation efforts have been frustrated -- and precious research money has been wasted -- as a result of distrust among the actors involved, and the attendant difficulties that can surround the use and exchange of genetic resources. The efforts of the Centres themselves to breed new varieties and to provide a global service for the conservation and distribution of PGRFA have been particularly hard-hit since the mid 1990s, by a dramatic decline in their ability to acquire and distribute new materials. We know that many of our national partners' research efforts have been affected in similar ways. During the past twenty years, uncertainty about access and benefit sharing has undermined international cooperation and discouraged actors from pooling their resources in support of research that is most relevant to poor people.

The Treaty has the potential to reverse this trend.

The Treaty is an agreement between national governments, but its successful implementation will provide the basis of a new era of transparency and trust among actors working at individual, community, corporate and international levels. The Alliance of Future Harvest Centres hopes that the Governing Body will take the opportunity of its First Meeting to send a clear signal to the international community: the era of uncertainty and mistrust is over. A new era that will be characterized by transparency, trust and multilateral cooperation and benefit sharing has begun.

Future Harvest Centres are committed to working within the framework of priorities created by the International Treaty. To that end, I am pleased to confirm that all eleven Future Harvest Centres with ex situ collections of PGRFA have approved the current text of the Agreement between the Centres and the Governing Body, as anticipated by Article 15 of the Treaty. We are planning a signing ceremony with representatives of all of the Centres to be held at FAO in Rome during the latter part of this year.

We also look forward to the adoption this week of the Standard Material Transfer Agreement, one that will make it as simple as possible to access and distribute materials within the Multilateral System of Access and Benefit Sharing created by the Treaty.

The Centres' commitment to the Treaty does not end with how the ex situ collections of PGRFA are administered. One might say that this is only the beginning of our commitment. The Centres, both individually and through the System-wide Genetic Resources Programme, will work hard to advance the goals of conservation, sustainable use, farmers' rights, transparent access and exchange of information, technology transfer, and capacity building as highlighted in articles 5, 6, 9, and 13 of the Treaty. At the end of the day, the multilateral system of access and benefit sharing which has preoccupied us all during the past few years must be seen as operating in service of these higher goals, and not as an end in itself. The Alliance of the Centres looks forward to working within the framework and spirit of the Treaty to advancing those goals.

In conclusion I would like to express our appreciation for allowing me this opportunity to address this audience.